
Wendee Brunish—So that others may live

March 10, 2014



"So that others may live"

The motto of the Los Alamos canine search and rescue organization that Wendee Brunish supports aptly defines her life, too.

At work, this Lab astrophysicist spends long hours searching the planet for concealed weapons of mass destruction. Dedicated to halting terrorists, Brunish studies nuclear explosion phenomenology, helping finding and characterizing underground facilities, where weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, or nuclear) or conventional weapons are being built or stored.

After hours—and often for days in dangerous conditions—she's searching steep, heavily wooded mountains for missing persons.

Nuclear explosion phenomenology studies address real world concerns

A technical staff member at the Lab since 1984, Brunish works in the Earth and Environmental Sciences Division. She studied chemistry (inspired by both of her parents) at Vassar College before switching majors and obtaining a master's and doctorate in astrophysics at the University of Illinois.

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Expanding horizons for young women

Brunish is equally dedicated to supporting diversity and mentoring women at all stages of their lives.

A member of the Laboratory Women's Committee and first chair of the Employee Advisory Committee, she helped establish the Lab's Ombuds Office.

She regularly participates in the Expanding Your Horizons workshops, which increase young women's interest in and awareness of mathematics, science, and other nontraditional professions.

She also founded an organization that rescues animals.

Not just a girl—overcoming gender stereotypes

Brunish knows how difficult it is for women in sciences, having encountered discrimination many times.

Once when presented to a classroom of college students that she'd be teaching, a professor introduced her as "this pretty little girl." At technical meetings, Brunish is often the only woman in the room, and she says women are still treated differently.

Women still have to prove themselves every time they enter a science arena, says Brunish, whereas when male scientists meet other males, they presume they are knowledgeable.

She looks forward to the day when there are enough female scientists and engineers so that they no longer have to go above and beyond to prove their technical prowess.

Breaking boundaries to reach a common goal

She says the most vital traits for women in science are perseverance and "just enough orneriness so that when someone says, 'You can't,' you just try harder."

"I am most proud of the fact that I am one of the few women at Los Alamos, in the United States and in the world to work on the containment of underground nuclear tests," says Brunish. "Vital to weapons testing, the containment team worked together to achieve a common goal of great importance."

"No one stopped to think about organizational boundaries or gender or ethnicity, because we all had to work really hard and cooperate closely or we would not get the job done."

A dash of humor never hurts

When thinking of what the themes of The Women in History Monthly worldwide—character, courage and commitment—means to her, Brunish touts cooperation and reliability founded on hard work.

With a dash of humor thrown in!

A tireless advocate for people and pets alike, in 1995 Brunish was awarded the Governor's Award for Outstanding New Mexico Women.

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